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FULLY FRANK

JOHN BEVERIDGE

We're giving the hackers a free shot

WHEN world IT expert Laura Chappell took a taxi ride from Melbourne to the airport she decided to turn on her "war drive" equipment for fun.

What she found shocked her so much she took part in a much bigger war drive around Australian capitals to check on wireless IT security.

"A very large financial institution was not only open but it was broadcasting its name for anyone to find.

"That is like advertising for hackers to come and get you."

A more systematic war drive by IT companies Altiris and SpectroTech found Melbourne was the worst capital in the country for wireless security with 18 per cent of access points using default configurations.

That means anyone with internet access and the right equipment can use information on the internet to hack into the company system.

Many of the other wireless portals

used very simple security to prevent people hacking into the system.

"It was shocking to see it so bad. A lot of folks out there don't realise they are as wide open as they are," said Chappell.

Comparing a computer system to a property, she said it was vital to continually patrol the fence to see that it was unbroken.

"The only way to do that is to automate everything — applying patches, checking for viruses and doing security and hardware audits on the system."

When such security checks were undertaken, they often found someone near the business was using the wireless portal.

And according to Chappell the stakes have never been higher with the very survival of many companies depending on their internet security.

"Companies have gone to the wall

when their credit card database was stolen and sold to an identity theft ring.

"There have been cases when a company's competitor comes out with an identical product a week before they were going to launch the same thing."

Chappell said hackers may be benign people using free internet access or they could be extremely smart and malicious.

Either way, at the very least they were degrading the performance of the computer network and costing the company money.

"It can be as simple as someone bringing in a wireless system from home so they can move their desk.

"The IT department don't even know about it but the guy in the next building could be looking around inside the firewall."